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SUBJECT: Somalis and Kenyans React Positively to President's Speech

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Summary

¶1. The Somalia Unit and Kenya Public Affairs Section co-hosted an event in Nairobi on July 11 at which Somali and Kenyan guests viewed President Obama's speech to the Ghanaian Parliament. We followed the President's speech with a panel discussion chaired by the Acting DCM/Consul General, the Economic Counselor, and two Kenyan Fulbright alumni. The 75 invited guests reacted very positively to the speech. Our Somali contacts saw the President's reference to Somalia as a sign that their country will play a more prominent role in the foreign policy of the United States. Our Kenyan contacts welcomed the "tough love" approach to their corrupt leaders, poor governance, and reliance on outside aid. End summary.

Successful Viewing
Event

¶2. The Somalia Unit and Kenya Public Affairs Section co-hosted a July 11 event at which approximately 75 Somali and Kenyan guests viewed President Obama's speech live. Following the speech, the Acting DCM/Consul General and Economic Counselor, along with two Kenyan Fulbright alumni, chaired a panel discussion about the speech. A diverse audience of Kenyan and Somali academics, civil society representatives, youth activists, and journalists listened keenly to both the speech and the four panelists' reactions to it. A lively discussion ensued, with more comments than questions and an overall positive take on the President's message.

Single Reference Means
New Focus on Somalia

¶3. Comments from our Somali guests were uniformly positive. Several comments focused on the President's single reference to Somalia, which they hoped meant that the new administration had resolved to dedicate an increased amount of attention to their country. A journalist praised the speech for having covered most of the problems affecting Africa, including Somalia. He noted that the President's mention of Somalia indicated a realization that Somalia's situation required international attention. A retired journalist said that President Obama's mention of Darfur and Somalia

indicated a focus on countries requiring security efforts, in a different vein from those suffering from disease and famine. A civil society activist mentioned her delight at the President's mention of Somalia, but said she hoped that the President's focus on stable African countries did not indicate a fatigue with unstable countries, particularly those in the Horn of Africa. Separately, Somali President Sharif reportedly welcomed the speech, noting that the Somali crisis affects the regions of the world far beyond Somalia. Somali media did not appear to focus strongly on the speech, likely owing to a weekend of intense fighting in Mogadishu that dominated headlines.

Obama "Understands Africa;"
Offers "Tough Love"

¶4. Many references to Kenya peppered throughout the speech did not go unnoticed. Kenyan panelists and audience alike noted Obama's "tough love" approach to Kenya and other faltering African democracies, and all appeared to appreciate his recognition that Africans need to take responsibility for their own problems. One panelist mentioned the difference between Obama's message and that of his envoys (particularly A/S Johnnie Carson and then-Deputy Commander to AFRICOM Ambassador Mary Yates), noting that Obama went beyond the "nuanced" differences in Africa policy to a clear change. A local news op-ed repeated the sentiment the following day. It seems to speak to another oft-repeated notion following Obama's speech that his African roots allow him to say things other Presidents could not. Indeed, as our two Embassy panelists pointed out, it may be that Obama is heard differently saying exactly the same things. But, as a young student noted, "Change is a slogan, not an ideology, and till now we've only taken it as a slogan."

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